

An Inaugural Thesis  
on the advantages  
of  
Scepticism  
in the study and improvement  
of  
Medicine

Submitted to the examination of  
John. W. C. Powell L. L. D. Provost,  
the Trustees and Medical Faculty of the  
University of Pennsylvania.

for the  
Degree of Doctor of Medicine

by  
Samuel Grunke of Virginia  
Honorary Member of the Medical Society of Philad.  
of the Philadelphia Medical Bureau and  
Member of the Pennsylvan Society of Philadelphia.

April 16<sup>th</sup> -  
1808.

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An Inaugural Thesis  
on

Scepticism. &c

I have employed this term, because it appeared to be better calculated to express my meaning, than any other I could select; the sense in which I design to use it is somewhat different from that in general acceptation.

The term scepticism has usually been employed to express a state of universal doubt or uncertainty of mind, incompatible with conviction of any kind. The possibility of the human mind's existing in such a state, has in my view been very justly called in question; certain it is that if such a state of mind be possible or exist in reality it must be

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unchangeable; for the uncertainty is already infinite and therefore cannot be increased; and evidence on every subject is alike doubtful with the subject itself; so that any attempt to prove the truth or existence of any proposition or object to such a mind would be absurd; it is perhaps unnecessary to add that it would be equally absurd for such a being to attempt to prove any doctrine whatever to be either true or false.—

By Scepticism then I mean that doctrine that denies the utility or even the existence of a principle of faith or believing faculty in the mind any farther than as it respects its own existence and attributes; and inculcates the propriety of requiring satisfactory evidence on every other subject before we give our assent.— This definition although somewhat different from that which is generally received, is I



conceive most consistent with the etymol-  
 ogy of the term, as it is derived from the  
 greek word *skeptomai* signifying to look  
 into or examine to deliberate; but as it  
 would be impossible to examine any such  
~~fact~~ <sup>fact</sup> or deliberate upon it were every thing  
 equally uncertain (for both these opera-  
 tions necessarily imply the positive exis-  
 tence of some objects) it is evident that no  
 such meaning was affixed to it by the ancients.  
 I do not wish to insinuate that derivative  
 words ought always to be employed in a  
 sense strictly conformable to the origi-  
 nal theme; my only desire is to produce a  
 sufficient warrant for using the term  
 in a sense different from that in which  
 it has been employed by those justly  
 celebrated literary ~~men~~ <sup>men</sup> who have  
 displayed so much ingenuity in support  
 of the doctrine which would warrant the  
 use of the phrase in the sense first mentioned





opening them the use of the term in the  
 sense last given, I shall proceed to treat  
 of the ~~the~~ <sup>instructed</sup> advantage of the state of mind  
~~expressed~~ by it, in the study and improve-  
 ment of medicine; ~~begin~~ by first address-  
 ing some examples immediately in point  
 to prove the advantages which have accrued  
 to medicine from the state of mind before  
 mentioned. Second, by shewing the injuries  
 which have resulted from its opposite  
 or too much credulity. Lastly offer a  
 few remarks on the nature of the evidence  
 which may be considered as decisive on  
 medical subjects. —

Perhaps to persons who are acquainted with  
 the characters of those who have contributed large-  
 ly to the improvement of medicine, and who  
 have studied <sup>it</sup> with most advantage to  
 themselves and the public, ~~it~~ from Sydenham  
 down to the present day, it may seem unneces-  
 sary to say any thing on our first head.

I have the honor to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 10th inst. in relation to the matter of the 1st of the same month. I have the honor to inform you that the same has been forwarded to the proper authorities for their consideration. I am, Sir, very respectfully,  
 Yours, &c.

But as direct opposites, perhaps the strongest evidence of the truth of my position, it seems to be an open confession that I am

Happily for mankind, such examples are too costly to be met with in the annals of mediocrity, as such it might be sufficient and to neglect the names of Sydenham, Harvey, Brown and Keach, to these might be added a long list of others, who are not less celebrated, whose omission in this place may seem injudicious, but as my aim is to prove the truth of a particular position, without an attempt at panegyric on characters, I shall content with the examples already enumerated.

I presume it will not be contended by any that Sydenham, Harvey &c were enabled to detect the errors and improve the partially correct opinions and practices of their predecessors, by implicitly adopting their errors;

whereas the same errors were not only

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but to improve it to the best advantage  
 of the patient is to be desired. The  
 matter then to be considered is not  
 whether the former mode of treating the Lues  
 the Small pox and a number of other Diseases  
 and the several other sorts are good.

I will now mention some facts as they  
 have appeared to show the imperices which  
 have resulted and may result from posses-  
 ing too little of this sceptical disposition.  
 Here I would gladly have been without  
 experience but unfortunately for the  
 happiness of mankind they are perhaps  
 more numerous than the former class;  
 and I think this is the case. It is from possessing  
 too little scepticism, or in other words being  
 too little inclined to philosophical investi-  
 gation, that the inhabitants of our various  
 countries and the vulgar of every country  
 place so much confidence in superstitious  
 and inert remedies in the  
 cure of their diseases; from the same cause  
 the vender of nostrums is enabled to distribute

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his frequently useless, but too often powerful  
 doses. But there are examples of a much  
 more important nature as it respects the  
 improvement of the science of medicine; we  
 have not the benefits arising from the im-  
 provement to which man made in medicine  
 by almost all the celebrated authors and  
 not as well as made in been almost con-  
 tempted by the vicious principles,  
 and practices, which first gained currency  
 from their names and have since been re-  
 tained by something of a superstitious  
 veneration for their memories? Was  
 not one of those great men formed as it  
 were an era in the science of medicine,  
 after which its progress in improvement has  
 been excited by the admiration which was  
 excited by the improvements already made  
 and the confidence placed in the theories  
 and practices then taught and pursued.  
 It would be superfluous to be more particular  
 in giving examples <sup>of the truth</sup> of either of the preceding  
 propositions, as every man who has read a single  
 systematic work in medicine has seen

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enough to convince the most obstinate.  
 But perhaps all this may seem unnecessary at the present day when innovation is so common and improvement (apparently so solid); but it is to be observed that this essay is not ~~an~~ written merely with a view of showing the injuries which have resulted from such conduct in former times, but to prevent the like injuries from occurring now from the same cause viz by too ready a belief in the ingenious speculations and plausible innovations which have <sup>late</sup> been made in the theory and practice of medicine. Let it not be inferred from this that I believe all the late improvements in medicine are merely pretences, such a belief would be not only absurd but in me highly absurd; and many improvements of the highest importance and most extensive utility have been made, none who has paid the least attention to the subject can doubt. But that there are also a number of innovations proposed whose correctness and utility have not been sufficiently demonstrated to

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control them to general confidence appears  
 to us especially correct therefore becomes necessary  
 for us to express in to the propriety of any pro-  
 posed improvement in medicine, not with  
 the sneering contempt of a bigot, educated  
 in the old school, nor with the anxious anxiety  
 of a modern innovator, who feels contempt  
 for every thing which was known previous  
 to the era of ~~the~~ his own existence, but with  
 the calm and moderation of the disciple of  
 truth; then shall we discover at least the pro-  
 bable importance of any doctrine which may  
 be taught and the value of the truth of the  
 theories are advanced and regulate our prac-  
 tice accordingly, without being dazzled by the  
 splendid pretences, or cheated by the wiles of  
 sophistry. We shall by this means also avoid  
 an enormous opposition to just principles  
 which has always been an obstacle in the  
 way of improvement in medicine.

I will now make a few remarks on the evidence  
 which may be considered as sufficient to establish  
 the truth of theory and the propriety of prac-  
 tice in medicine.

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although we ~~are~~ <sup>are</sup> ~~not~~ <sup>not</sup> in the business of medicine we find a number of instances in which too little credit has been given to merely propositional theories and practice ~~is~~ <sup>is</sup> ~~not~~ <sup>not</sup> yet the reverse is not frequently the case. I do not pretend to decide which of the errors is attended with the fewer & all consequences, but certainly it is best to know both of dignities; this can only be done by forming a proper standard; both in theory and propriety in practice; this seems at first sight to be a very easy task indeed every one knows that no practice is ~~greater~~ <sup>greater</sup> but that which is successful, and no theory can be ~~greater~~ <sup>greater</sup> but that which produces successful practice. But though it cannot be denied that such a standard would be correct yet it does not appear to be of much use ~~or~~ <sup>or</sup> use, because if a criterion were formed in this way, practice must always precede theory which would destroy the utility of principles in medicine and reduce physicians to the same level with the herd of empirics who practise at random and ~~run~~ <sup>run</sup> with the lines of their habits.



It does not at least in the present state of our knowledge  
that the same method which has been successful in the  
natural sciences can be applied to the human mind. In the  
time which in most other cases has been given up  
in the circumstances of health has fallen to the lot  
of the mind and laborer when a sufficient number  
of experiments which has been considered,  
the foundation of reason to meet some theory  
in other sciences has failed in this; and so great  
has been its deficiency in evidence that its utility  
by in other sciences begins to be doubted.  
How shall we account for the dissimilarity between  
this and other sciences? Hence is it that that  
which is an unerring guide in other cases  
should in this only be found to be insufficient  
and fallacious? Is it from the insufficiency of the  
means we employ or our not employing them  
in a proper manner? As I presume no one will  
contend that there are other modes of acquiring  
knowledge than what are already known, it  
must be admitted that the defect is in ourselves,  
the great desideratum then is, to avoid the  
errors to which we have hitherto fallen in  
reasoning and experimenting. After so much

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inspectual labour on this subject by the most celebrated characters, it would justly be thought highly presumptuous for me to say any thing positive, I will therefore merely throw out one or two uncertain conjectures.

Perhaps there has been too much attention paid to some of the phenomena of <sup>Disease</sup> ~~life~~ to the exclusion of others; thus all the different <sup>by time</sup> grades and states of ~~of the same~~ diseases have been minutely attended to while too little attention has been paid to the distinct natures of each, ~~have~~ while others have paid too great regard to the nature of the disease without regarding its degree, hence as degree does not afford a distinguishing mark all diseases have been reduced to one by the former while they have been infinitely varied by the latter class of observers.

I do not know that there is any character which applies to all diseases so as to reduce them to one class except that they are all different from health, but that is nothing more than saying that they all are diseases which forms nothing. Health as has been long observed is nothing more than an equilibrium or



just proportion between all the constituent  
parts of the system, and as those parts  
may be altered in their proportions in differ-  
ent ways each alteration will constitute  
a different disease; But again as each of these  
alterations may be greater or less this will  
afford a spectrum not of a different ~~disease~~  
disease but of a higher or lower grade of the  
same disease; this last is perhaps the  
chimbling block of the nosologists

